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THE MIAs

Lost or Merely Forgotten?

PAUL A. GIGOT

IT WAS A HOT, clear Indochinese afternoon, May 10, 1972, and Navy Commander Harry Lee Blackburn's F-4 Phantom jet fighter was escorting a bomber strike squadron to Hai Duong, North Vietnam. Blackburn, the pilot, and Lieutenant Steven Rudloff, the backseater, first saw the MiGs approaching after the squadron had passed the target. Blackburn banked at a narrow arc to challenge the MiGs, aiming over the center of Hai Duong. Then the anti-aircraft guns opened up and Blackburn's plane was hit. The F-4, burning, nosed down in a crash spiral. Rudloff ejected first, followed seconds later by Blackburn. According to the F-4 pilot who was following at Blackburn's wing, the chutes landed cleanly some two hundred yards apart in the Red River; he heard the beeper sounds which indicated that Rudloff and Blackburn were alive. The area was heavily populated. "The time delay between each ejection strongly indicates that both men were not seriously injured since each was able to eject himself," says a Navy report sent to Blackburn's wife and three children.

Rudloff was lucky. Captured immediately, held in Vietnam for the next ten months, he was released in 1973 with the other American POWs during Operation Homecoming. At his debriefing Rudloff said that the North Vietnamese had several times assured him that they had also taken Blackburn prisoner. But Blackburn, dead or alive, has never returned to the United States.

"MIAs/POWs: Ask Kissinger Why?" reads the sticker on a tan bookcase in the office of Frank Sieverts, standing only a few feet from the autographed wall portraits of Averell Harriman and Dean Rusk. Sieverts, a handsome man with bushy blond-grey hair, has been the U.S. State Department expert on MIAs (Missing in Action) for nearly 15 years, through four Administrations. He believes the Vietnamese are making adequate efforts to discover and return the remains of American MIAs. "Reasonably, a remarkable amount has been accomplished."

"Frank Sieverts is a lying bastard with absolutely no credibility—and you can quote me," says Dermot Foley, legal counsel for the National League of Families. Foley is an intense man, bespectacled, balding. He still wears a tarnished copper band engraved with the name of an American MIA. His brother, who has five children, has been missing since early in the war. Foley believes that the North Vietnamese have been withholding information, and that our State Department has in effect abandoned the MIAs and their families. "They've been trying to get rid of us, as they do after every war," he says.

Frank Sieverts and Dermot Foley are men whose views have hardened into absolutes. As Sieverts says, "I'm depicted as the Antichrist." It is difficult to sort truth from passion. There are few obvious villains. But the evidence and the views of disinterested observers document a pitiful record of non-cooperation by the North Vietnamese. And they raise questions about the U.S. commitment to obtaining an adequate MIA accounting.

The most revealing data are contained in a Department of Defense (DOD) report informally named the "Hawaii Briefing." It was presented to President Carter's Woodcock Commission on MIAs (named for its chairman, Leonard Woodcock, now ambassador to China), in February 1977 and was treated as classified material. Its public disclosure was forced by a Freedom of Information Act request by the National League of Families. The briefing divided the 2,546 MIAs into five categories, based on the degree of knowledge which U.S. intelligence indicated the North Vietnamese had about each MIA. For example, Harry Lee Blackburn is a Category One. That is, the DOD has "confirmed knowledge" that the Vietnamese knew about Blackburn. In some cases Category Ones were identified by name by Radio Hanoi or exploited for propaganda. Other Category One proof includes reports from POWs or from "highly reliable intelligence sources." Navy Lieutenant Ron Dodge is in Category One. He was the only pilot shot down on May 17, 1967 in Nghe An province, North

Vietnam. Three days later Radio Hanoi acknowledged the time and place of Dodge's capture. A photograph of Dodge, with his head bandaged, surrounded by NV guards, was published in *Paris Match* in 1967, and in *Pravda*. He was also featured in the propaganda film *Pilots in Pajamas*.

Air Force Captain John Swanson is a Category Two MIA, the category of "suspect knowledge." When his jet was hit off the coast of Nghe An province, Swanson parachuted into the ocean among some small boats. His wingman observed Swanson's chute and heard his beeper signals. DOD intelligence later confirmed that a pilot had been captured that day by local fishermen.

The remaining three categories are of "doubtful knowledge," "unknown knowledge," and "unrelated to degree of enemy knowledge." The Hawaii Briefing admitted that "it is doubtful that the enemy would have knowledge of the[se] specific individuals."

'A Lot of Hooey'?

Of the 2,546 MIAs in February 1977, the Briefing listed 179 in Category One, 1,160 in Category Two, 344 in Category Three, 428 in Category Four, and 436 in Category Five. The Briefing acknowledged that the "categorizing is, at best, an inexact science," so some of the placements may be mistaken. (DOD judgments were 91 percent correct about repatriated POWs.) The Briefing also recognized, as even Foley and the families have, that a total accounting will never be possible. But the report concluded: "We know [the NV] have information about some of our missing people but, for reasons of their own, have withheld it from us.... it would be reasonable to expect an accounting for those men in Categories One and Two—a total of 1,339 men." And yet since March 1973 the Vietnamese have returned the remains of only 69 men: 33 in Category One, 31 in Category Two, one in Category Three, two in Category Four, and two in Category Five.

According to Frank Sieverts, the Hawaii Briefing was a hasty assessment compiled by overzealous DOD officials. Sieverts explains with relishing similes.